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Introduction:

Is secularism bad for women?

La laïcité nuit-elle aux femmes?

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Religion and gender relations are at the heart of transformative processes in contemporary Europe, including migration, cultural pluralism, bioethical debates and demographic change. These processes have prompted challenges to secularization theories (Aune et al., 2008). Religion's presence in the public sphere and civil societies plays a crucial role in debates on the meaning of democracy and the future of multicultural societies. A critical gender perspective can shed new light on secularism, secularization and multiculturalism in Europe, and the articles in this special issue seek to do this.

This special issue originated in an international workshop series, funded by the International Society for the Sociology of Religion, and run in 2015 (in Uppsala, Coventry and Lisbon). It brought scholars – and some practitioners from public, private and civil society organisations – together to address the relationship between politics and religious women's rights and agency. It aimed to shape debates about how to ensure the freedoms of both women and religious people in multicultural Europe.

Some feminist scholars, including Patel (2013), Yuval-Davis (2014), Badinter (2003) and Varma, Dhaliwal and Nagarajan (2016), argue that a form of secularism is the best way to ensure gender equality. They argue that allowing religious organisations political power

enshrines gender inequality through state support for religious cultural practices that harm women (e.g. female genital mutilation, polygamy, forced marriage, forbidding contraception or abortion) and state funding of fundamentalists posing as moderates. They criticise multiculturalism (a political approach adopted from the 1970s in Britain, Canada, Australia, Germany and Sweden to celebrate ethnic and religious diversity) as entrenching gender injustice. Other scholars, such as Niamh Reilly (2011) and Teresa Toldy (2011, see also Woodhead, 2013) consider liberal secularism a bad political arrangement for religious people, because it excludes them from the political and public sphere, for example by denying funds to faith-based welfare or education services, prohibiting the wearing of religious symbols in public spaces, or forbidding 'religious arguments' in political debates.

These debates echo the heated response to Susan Moller Okin's 1997 essay 'Is multiculturalism bad for women?', to which this workshop series and this special issue owes its inspiration. Okin (1999: 23) argued that 'Establishing group rights to enable some minority cultures to preserve themselves may not be in the best interests of the girls and women of the culture, even if it benefits the men'. Advocating women's full inclusion in political decisions, she warns that otherwise 'their interests may be harmed…by the granting of such rights' (Okin, 1999: 24). Lauded by some for highlighting gender inequalities, others criticised Okin for ignoring differences between cultures and gender inequalities within majority populations and assuming that all minority groups inhibit women's agency; her use of extreme examples (e.g. child marriage) and neglect of material inequalities minority women face were also critiqued (Phillips, 2007; Shachar, 2001; Song, 2005; Korteweg and Selby, 2012).

Discovering how states can support equality within and between groups and acknowledge individual and group differences simultaneously is a crucial task. The gender and secularism debate poses challenges to two dominant theories about which political system best promotes the rights of women and religious people. Put simply, feminist scholarship has often neglected religious women (leading to their marginalisation), while religious inclusion scholars have neglected women (assuming that religious freedom is available to men and women equally) (King, 1995). In the twenty-first century, scholars and policymakers have begun advocating state approaches to religion that challenge both religious *and* gender inequalities and enhance the wellbeing of both women and religious minorities (Scott, 2013; Rochefort, 2002).

Asking 'Is secularism bad for women?' turns Okin's 'Is multiculturalism bad for women?' question on its head, debating instead the benefits and drawbacks of secularism. With an academic and political shift having occurred away from ethnic identities towards religious ones ('Pakistanis' and 'Bangladeshis' have in the twenty-first century become 'Muslims'), multiculturalism has become 'multi-faithism' (Yuval-Davis, 2014). Therefore, the 'is multiculturalism bad for women?' debate must be examined using the lens of 'religion' and 'secularism'.

Secularism is a contested concept (Jakobsen and Pellegrini, 2008; Ferrara, 2009; Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, 2012) with varying meanings. In the following discussion we start out from José Casanova's division between the secular as a central modern epistemic category, secularization as an analytical concept for analysing social modernisation processes and secularism as a worldview (Casanova, 2009). *Political secularism,* then, refers to the political project of separation between religion and the state, which has taken many forms. Globally, a spectrum of relationships between religion(s) and state(s) exists, from establishment of religion

(where a religion is aligned with, and privileged by, the state) to strict legal, administrative and political separation or secularity (Bader,2003; Fox, 2006). Even where states adopt political secularism, they do so in different ways. In French *laïcité*, the state can intervene in religion, but not vice versa (Baubérot and Milot, 2011). In American secularism, neither the state nor religion can intervene in each other's domain. In India, the state keeps a 'principled distance' from religious institutions but supports and respects religious diversity (Bhargava, 2011). The principle of separation draws on the underlying normative assumption of the tie between secularism and democracy. In liberal democratic visions, religious values should have no room in the political arena and be confined to the private sphere (Rawls, 1997). Nevertheless, as feminist scholars argue (Benhabib, 1992), the controversies over religious dress codes, bioethics, women's bodies, and women's rights exemplify the challenge of establishing a clear separation between the private and the public spheres.

This understanding of secularism is closely related to secularization, which refers to changes in *social phenomena*, particularly the (purported) decreasing influence of religious groups on law, politics and the public sphere (an assumption that is widely criticized). In contemporary Europe, migration and 'digital migration' (the free flow of information, opinions and imaginaries in different media) have increased the pluralism of religious and cultural landscapes. Migrants with different cultural backgrounds, and some conservative native communities, are often positioned as 'others' through the merging of culture and religion, so that the discussion over minority rights often includes (and overlaps) cultural *and* religious differences. Moreover, media play a crucial and sometimes unpredictable role in relation to the framing and meanings construction, with regard to migrants and religion (Lövheim, 2017; Ozzano and Giorgi, 2016).

Secularization may also be used for discussing concerns *the transformation of individuals' religious practices and beliefs*. On one hand, individuals' attitudes and behaviours are supposedly less influenced by religion. On the other, a process of religious individualization means that individual religiosity is increasingly detached from religious authority, making the task of identifying religions' core values complex and blurring the distinction between 'religious' and 'secular' values and spheres of society. In a broader perspective, in the 'secular age' the ways of experiencing the sacred have changed (Taylor, 2007).

Debates on the banning of the full face veil in public in Belgium, France, Denmark and Sweden, domestic, sexual and 'honour' violence within minority communities, circumcision and female genital mutilation, the use of Islamic arbitration tribunals (or sharia councils) (Korteweg and Selby, 2012) and faith-based education and welfare services, all exemplify the centrality of women's rights to debates and policies on secularism and multiculturalism. But while women are often at the 'sharp edge' of these political debates, they rarely have an equal say in them (Khan, 2013).

Reading secularism through the lenses of gender

In the last few years, scholars in the European (or near-European) context have started to critique secularism from a feminist or gender perspective, with Cady and Fessenden's (2013) volume being a key example (see also Reilly, 2011; Toldy, 2011; Rochefort, 2002). They have shown that, historically, secular states have often not upheld women's rights, and some have been just as gender unequal as religious ones (Scott, 2013 names France, where women did not gain suffrage until 1944, as a case in point). This work points to the importance of

deconstructing the concept, showing not only, as Asad (2003) does, that the secular is a construct in the same way religion is, but also that it is a gendered concept.

Joan Scott explains that secularism relies on a set of oppositions (religion/secular, emotion/reason, women/men, private/public) that consign both religion and women to a private sphere, intending to limit the negative effects of religion in public, but in fact allowing the power of patriarchal versions of religion to be redoubled in the so-called private sphere, with negative consequences for women. In other words, insisting on the separation of religion from a 'secular' public sphere demands that the spheres are treated as separate and that is not something that has been good for women. 'The public/private demarcation so crucial to the secular/religious divide rests on a vision of sexual difference that legitimizes the political and social inequality of women', Scott (2013: 27) contends. The politics of the Middle East demonstrates this, Mahmood (2013: 51) adds, as:

> religion-based family laws are not simply leftovers from the past but are a product of the simultaneous relegation of religion and sexuality to the private sphere…one of the contradictions entailed in the secularization of Middle Eastern societies is that just as religious authority becomes marginal to the conduct of civil and political affairs, it simultaneously comes to acquire a privileged space in the regulation of the private sphere.

There can be a double or triple marginalisation when religion is confined to the public sphere, Toldy (2011) points out. Not only are *women* and *religious people* marginalised, but this marginalisation is especially directed at *Muslim women who veil*, who are considered the 'religious others' whose faith is not amendable to 'reformulation in accord with a normative model of religiosity – one that is amendable to the rationality of liberal political rule' (Mahmood, 2013: 48). When feminists are complicit in – or worse, instigate – calling for versions of secularism that are in reality motivated by public fears of Islamic extremism, this is concerning (Toldy, 2011).

Case studies of particular countries shed crucial light on these issues. These include a number of articles about France, which critique its version of secularism for excluding veiled Muslim women. Barras (2010: 229) argues that:

> the headscarf controversy in France has been a way for the French secular state and elites to reinforce a certain exclusive understanding of laïcité (secularism), as being more than a legal principle, which symbolises an ethic of collective life… [W]omen wearing headscarves have been identified as incapable of protecting and fostering Republican values while, in addition, also representing an external threat. They have therefore been slowly excluded from partaking in the activities of the polis, and deprived from enjoying their full citizenship rights' and duties.

Rootham (2014), Selby (2011, 2014), also pinpoint the problems of French secularism for Muslim women who veil.

Turkey became a prominent example of state secularism after the end of the Ottoman Empire via the rein of Atatürk and his secularist successors from the 1920s. The Turkish state used images of women's supposed emancipation (for instance, women wearing Western-style dress) to support its secularist work, yet it also obstructed women's participation in the public sphere by banning Muslim women from veiling, meaning that for these women, secularism was not a good thing (Çinar, 2008); our authors Maritato and Topal take up this story in this special issue.

Certain forms of secularism lead to the exclusion of religious women beyond France and Turkey, Minganti (2014) shows in the Swedish context. She discusses how a women's shelter originally run by and for Muslim women became overtaken by a 'normative secularism' that came, in xenophobic vein (reflecting the post-9/11 context), to regard Islam as bad for women, leading to it ceasing to be a Muslim-run shelter. Bracke and Fadil (2012) focus on Belgium, underlining that the debates over the 'headscarf issue' deal in fact with the meaning and the understanding of subjectivity and agency, hence challenging the notion of secularism.

Actually, secularism should not simply be seen as a problem for Muslim women, and Muslim women should not be assumed to oppose secularism. In countries with large Christian majorities, such as Italy, the Catholic Church is the main opponent of secularism. Salih (2009) argues that there, Muslim women have actually supported a secular or pluralist challenge to the church's hegemonic status and argued for the expansion of democratic spaces, so that religious women's voices may be heard in the public sphere.

Finally, authors have explored how feminist groups approach secularism, and van den Brandt (2014) and Aune (2015) both show that feminist groups take a variety of positions on a spectrum of from being pro-secularist to being pro-religion, informed particularly by their attempts to understand Islam.

Is secularism bad for women? Steps towards an answer

It is crucial that researchers work together to provide a systematic answer to the question: how can states promote both gender equality and religious freedom, without harming either religious people or women? What political approaches will enhance religious inclusion and the full participation of women? Is secularism the best way forward, and if so, what kind of secularism will guarantee religious women's rights and full social inclusion? How can religious freedom be guaranteed to religious institutions, communities and individuals?

This special issue brings together, as the workshop series did, a new generation of European scholars who are producing pioneering work on these issues across countries with different cultural trends and social dynamics. It focuses on Europe and builds on discussions at the 'Interdisciplinary Innovations in the Study of Religion and Gender' network (leader: Prof. Anne-Marie Korte, Utrecht University), which led in 2015 to the initiation of a new professional association, the International Association for the Study of Religion and Gender (IARG). This journal issue also draws from the expertise of North American scholars involved in related projects (e.g., Arizona State University's 'Religion and International Affairs: Through the Prism of Rights and Gender' project – see Cady and Fessenden, 2013). Moreover, the workshop series sought to bring together academics, activists and policymakers directly involved in legislating about religion and gender and to thus intervene in decisions that have real consequences for religious women's lives. One key way this occurred was through the writing of the 'Coventry Statement on the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 1464 "Women and Religion in Europe"', endorsed by 25 participants in the second workshop (in Coventry). The statement argued that the resolution presents religion in a negative light and called for a more balanced view of religion's role in women's lives (2015):

> We are concerned that an underlying bias persists, exemplified in Resolution 1464, which construes religion in negative terms and pre-emptively denies women's agency in religion. We urge the Committee to continue to develop and support an approach that

> seeks to attain a positive balance between the rights of women to freedom of religion and expression and to equality on gender and other grounds, wherein the voices of diverse women and context-specific, evidence-based research are paramount.[1]

Thus, the workshop's reach and impact aimed to be not simply academic, but to contribute to policy and activism by women and religious communities.

We have not produced a definitive answer to the question 'is secularism bad for women?' We do not presume that such an answer is possible, but this issue needs relentless careful and critical reflection which should always take the context in consideration. In order to further this process, the following steps are necessary: 1) to define, and where necessary deconstruct, the question: what do we mean by 'secularism', 'bad' and 'women'? 2) to take an interdisciplinary approach drawing upon the knowledge and methods of different fields; and 3) to examine the question in local, national and international dimensions.

To define, and where necessary deconstruct, the question: what do we mean by 'secularism', 'bad' and 'women'?

Political and legal theorists show that secularism is used to refer primarily to forms of religion-state separation. There are many versions of religion-state separation, however, Bader (2010), for instance, distinguishes twelve varieties or meanings of secularism. These scholars also show that the legal and institutional religion-state relationships are crucial for citizens' lives. However, insights from sociological work underline that we cannot discount the emic, or everyday, use of the term by people to describe societies that are not politically secularist - for instance, of conservative religious people in religiously-inclusive European states who express grief that they live in a 'secular society' where they perceive the legal system as not religious enough (by which they mean sufficiently compatible with their version of religion).

'Bad' is also a value-laden term. In this context 'bad' can connote marginalisation, legal sanction, hostility, disapproval, violence, obstruction from paid employment, or a variety of other things. For some, a bad situation is one in which religious women are marginalised, their faith disapproved or obstructed in the public sphere, for instance politics, employment or education. But for others who believe faith belongs in the private life of individuals – and many religious people think like this – this is not 'bad', but 'good', as faith has its place, and that place is private. Scholars' views and assumptions about what 'good', and 'bad' mean are generally based on a mixture of academic evidence and their own assumptions and ideological commitments. This is as true for this question as for any other, and it should be acknowledged when responding to a question such as 'is secularism bad for women?'

'Women' is also a complex term. Which people does the category of 'women' include? When academics, policymakers, religious communities and 'women's groups' work with 'women', do they give equal space to black, working-class, lesbian, disabled, illiterate and childless women, alongside white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied women who are parents? Given the challenge to the gender binary posted by gender studies scholars and the experiences of people who live across and beyond it (for example, those who identify as intersex, transgender or gender non-binary), 'women' is not a clear-cut category. Although gender and religion scholars argue that religious women must be included within the remit of intersectional womanhood (Weber, 2015), many fall into the trap of only including certain religious 'women', particularly Muslim women (because they are the largest religious minority within many

European countries and there has been a major increase in academic projects on Islam) and Christian women (given the enduring importance of Christianity in Europe); a glance at the contents and titles of recent books and essays on gender and religion illustrates this. Yet for gender equality and religious freedom need to be made possible for all women and gender non-binary people whatever their socio-economic or health status, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, age, nationality and other features of diversity.

Finally, as Brown (2009) notes in the introduction to the essay volume 'Is critique secular?' even the word 'is' demands interrogation.

To take an interdisciplinary approach drawing upon the knowledge within and methods of different fields

Each of these fields provides different methods to research the answer. Sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists and religious studies scholars might use survey research, analysis of large-scale data sets such as the World Values Survey (e.g. Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Norris and Inglehart, 2004), interviews or participant observation research with religious women to ask them about the impact of the legal regulation of religion on their lives. Historical perspectives would look beyond the contemporary situation and show the history of ideas and state positions on religion and the secular, explaining today's situation in terms of what has gone before. A media studies approach would look at media representations of religion and wonder how these might affect social attitudes to religion. All of these methods are necessary to highlight the main factors intervening in the complex entanglements of the issue at stake.

To examine the question in local, national and international dimensions.

The workshop series, and this special issue, focused mostly on the local and national approaches, but the global dimension is crucial. The workshop series tackled the issues in micro, meso and macro domains: women's religious agency; civil society; and the political and public arena. Each workshop focused on one domain.

1) *Women's religious agency: negotiating secularism and multiculturalism in everyday life*

This workshop, which took place at Uppsala University (May 2015), explored how on the individual or everyday level, women are negotiating religion, secularism, multiculturalism and non-religion. Two keynote speakers (Elina Vuola, University of Helsinki, spoke on theological perspectives on lived religion and gender and Pia Karlsson Minganti, Stockholm University, spoke on secularism and the marginalization of Muslim women's faith-based agency) and 15 presenters from 7 countries (Sweden, Finland, Norway, Germany, Italy, Denmark, Belgium) gave papers. Topics included motherhood in Sweden and Denmark, Muslim women in Sweden, faith-based dispute resolution and family law in Belgium and the Netherlands and women's religious agency in post-Chernobyl B*elarus.*

2) *Negotiating secularism and multiculturalism through civil society organisations*

This workshop, at Coventry University (July 2015) investigated what women's and religious organisations and groups are doing to address faith, secularism and multiculturalism. Two keynote speakers (Niamh Reilly, National University of Ireland Galway, spoke on 'can secularism be reclaimed as a non-oppressive feminist principle?' and Line Nyhagen, Loughborough University, spoke on 'religion and gender equality: a battleground without

scope for common ground?') and 16 presenters from 6 countries (UK, USA, Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Germany) gave papers. Topics included the negotiation of religion in a secular women's organisation in Belgium, Catholic feminists in Brazil and a Turkish Muslim women's organisation.

3) *Political and public approaches to gender, secularism and multiculturalism*

This workshop, at the Centre for Social Studies in Lisbon (part of Coimbra University, November 2015), analysed political debates on religion and women's rights in the public sphere. It explored how political and public institutions, including the media, education, law and employment, are negotiating women's and religious rights. Two keynote speakers (Chia Longman, Ghent University, spoke on forced unveiling as a harmful secular practice and Teresa Toldy, CES Lisbon, spoke on gender and the refugee crisis) and 29 presenters from 12 countries (Brazil, Turkey, Canada, Portugal, Italy, France, UK, Greece, Netherlands, Finland, Germany, Indonesia) gave papers. Topics included the Italian debate on secularism and LGBTQ citizenship, Jewish women in Greece and religion and gender in Swedish media.

These micro, meso and macro levels intersect and shape people's lives and experiences, whether or not they are aware of this; for instance, state policies on the wearing of religious symbols (macro) can have unexpected repercussions for a woman attacked in the street for wearing a headscarf (micro), and changes to law (macro) come about through activism by individuals (micro) and groups (meso).

Is secularism bad for women? The authors' perspectives

To introduce the articles in this issue, we begin with the macro level before moving to meso than micro levels. Niamh Reilly addresses the entanglements between secularism, religion, and women's emancipation. On the one hand, secularism is commonly perceived as strictly connected to emancipation. On the other hand, ethnocentric enforcements of secularism are implicated in oppressive practices directed at minority women and communities. At the same time, while religiously-justified authoritarian movements against rights for women and LGBTQ people continue to emerge, extra-European religious women's groups fight for freedom and emancipation. Reilly posits the necessity of recasting secular thinking within a wider re-theorisation of emancipatory feminist practice, able to recognise the positivity of religious subjectivities and norms in emancipatory political projects.

Line Nyhagen discusses three different Western secular feminist positions on religion, which she names the 'hard', 'mixed hard and soft', and 'soft' positions. Drawing on the examples of three high-profile secular feminist women's organisations in Europe – the UK-based Women Against Fundamentalism and Southall Black Sisters and the Belgium-based European Women's Lobby – she argues that both the 'hard' and 'mixed hard and soft' secularist positions can be bad for women since they fail to acknowledge religious women as agents rather than victims and fail to acknowledge that religious faith can have a legitimate role in the public sphere. Only a 'soft' secular feminist stance is capable of including religious women's active and reflexive role in shaping, negotiating and changing their own beliefs and practices as well as partaking in democratic deliberation. However, if this position does not take into account the production, endurance and power of institutional forms of religion for women, it also risks becoming a secularism that fails religious women.

Nella van den Brandt and Chia Longman's article addresses a Belgian women's organisation (the meso level). They focus upon an ethnic minority women's organisation, ella. This organisation has no religious identity. It is concerned with women and LGBT empowerment and emancipation. However, since it exists in a society with a culturally Christian tradition, the topic of religion is unavoidable. Moreover, the existence of a representative Muslim community in Belgium raises the question of the reconcilability of ethnic and religious minority communities and women's emancipation. Considering (even among feminists) that 'religion is bad' for women and invoking secularity as a 'safe house' for women is not without the risk of excluding religious women and their perspectives, especially women from minoritised communities (religion may work as a strategy to invisibilize women and minorities). The authors come to the conclusion that ella subverts the cliché of 'religion against women', since it challenges religious authorities by proceeding to new interpretations of religion, out of the mainstreaming interpretations. In this sense, ella is described by van den Brandt and Longman as 'an implicit agent in reshaping religious-secular binaries', since it questions both the modern notion of secularity as shutting religion away in a private space, and the notion that religion is a denial of emancipation.

A different group or organisation of religious women are explored by Chiara Maritato, using her ethnographic research into the daily work of the female preachers (vaizeler) in Turkey who are hired by the state-organized Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and whose work takes place in the intersections of official and unofficial religiosity. Maritato's article sheds light on the intriguing dynamics put in place by official top-down aims to regulate and standardize the heterogeneous religious field in a secularized yet religiously quite plural society. On one hand, the article illustrates the ways in which this kind of politics, as practiced in Turkey, gives women new, public and supported religious authority. On the other hand, the women preachers navigate in a very complicated space between normative and dogmatic ideas about what is good religion in a secular society and multiple, often traditional, popular lived religious realities. This case shows how women's new religious agency and authority can be both enabled and conditioned by contingent and evolving religio-political, and in the Turkish case secularist, stately structures. In Turkey, the state monopoly on religion – and respective regulation and governance of less wanted forms of religion – is very much reflected in the experience of the female preachers who become one instrument of this regulation. This argument is illustrated and supported by ethnographic work observing and interviewing the vaizeler preaching in the mosques in Istanbul.

From the perspective of micro-history, Mariachiara Giorda focuses her attention on a group of women living near a monastery, in the North Western part of Italy. Through the collection of their stories, Giorda follows the life trajectories of these women from their wealthy and Catholic upbringing to their political choices of activism in extra-parliamentarian groups and associations close to the political violence of the extreme-left in the 1960s and 1970s. In their adult-to-old age, these women came back to the Christian faith of their origins, with a quasi-monastic choice of life. The analysis of life narratives permits Giorda to explore the connections between these women's peculiar life-experiences and the vivid description of the role of politics and religion in their life trajectories, in which secularism and religion are strictly interconnected.

In their article, Palmisano and Martino claim that the gender perspective and interest in women's religious life has been relatively absent in sociology of religion in Italy. To correct

this, the writers draw on survey materials to make a thorough investigation of the present transformations in the landscape of religion and gender in Italy. While still one of the most strongly Catholic societies in Europe (when measured by religious practice), Italian society is clearly on its way towards secularization and pluralization. The religious beliefs, activities and worldviews of young Italian women and men are turning towards more subjective spirituality, and the gender gap between more religious women and more secularized men is narrowing. Women have traditionally been responsible for religious education of children at home but today young women are shown to be distancing themselves from the Catholic Church particularly in respect to moral, ethical and family-related values. However, there still are signs of a gender gap as well as interesting differences in comparison to many Western European societies. Even if women on the one hand increasingly turn towards secular values (even more strongly than men do) and subjective religiosity (or 'designer religion'), on the other hand their lived religiosity continues to be more modelled by Catholic tradition than men's. In certain age groups, young men in fact show more interest in types of alternative spirituality than women do, a fact that is not present in many other European societies. This phenomenon may be partly related to the continuing traditional upbringing and socialization of girls which does not encourage expressive individuality; this gendered socialization would make young women, according to Palmisano and Martino, into specifically Italian 'Catholic designers'.

Semiha Topal focuses on the complex interactions between the religious and the secular through the analysis of how women living in Turkey, a Muslim-majority country governed by a secularist state, compose their religious identities and practice and frame their agency. Topal conducted semi-structured interviews with highly educated, professional Muslim women, exploring their forms of piety and analysing the practices of hijab and ritual prayer as technologies of self-cultivation, rather than mere markers and symbols of identity. The stories of these women express a fascinating complexity and depict the intricate entanglements of social pressure, personal convictions and individual religiosity. Topal indirectly suggests that the ways in which women experience secularism – an individual choice, an imposition, or merely a context to deal with – not only lead to different answers to whether or not secularism is bad for women. It also shapes back women's religiosity and convictions, contributing to the process of defining and redefining the individual and social meanings attributed to religion.

Is secularism bad for women? The editors' perspective

The contributions in this collection address the entanglements between women, religion, and secularism from different perspectives and disciplines, with a variety of methodological approaches, and focusing on the institutional, social, and individual levels in a wide range of geographical contexts. First of all, they add to our knowledge and understanding of the multiple interactions between women and religion, women and secularism, and secularism and religion. The authors highlight how secularism can be bad for some women, and good (or not so bad) for others, explore the various ways in which religion can be bad for some women, and good (or not so bad) for others, and specifically investigate the place of religious women in a variety of secularisms.

Hence, the articles in this collection contribute to reframing the initial question 'Is secularism bad for women?' into the more accurate 'which secularisms are bad for which women?'

Some forms of secularism – some 'secularisms'– are bad for some religious women. In Europe, the secularisms that are worst for women are the 'hard' form, which not only seek to separate

religion and state (leaving religion in the private sphere, sometimes regulating religion in this sphere too) but also oppose through law and regulation, and vocally criticise, women's religious practices. French secularism is currently the most problematic example. Until recently, neighbouring Turkey could also be accused of this. Moreover, Muslim women who veil are the most frequent victims/targets of this secularism. Yet it is important not to 'throw out the baby with the bathwater', for forms of 'secularism', or of religion-state relations, that are about 'human freedom' and 'respect for religious pluralism' (Reilly, 2011: 25) are surely positive.

But, more than that, the articles go beyond the study of secularism at the macro, meso, and micro levels, opening up new paths for the analysis of the boundaries (and the entanglements) between religion and politics. They focus on the *visions*, the *practice*, and the *experiences* of these boundaries. In this perspective, they shed light on the relevance of considering the power relations structuring the boundaries between religion and politics, and the role of the actors in negotiating, constructing and deconstructing them.

Several scholars have pointed out that the issue is, irrespective of language about religion or secularism, above all about democracy (Reilly, 2011; Taylor, 2011). If 'secularism' enables tolerance, respect, religious freedom and treats the voices of diverse groups of religious women as just as important as those of men, it is surely good for women.

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Notes

1. The Coventry Statement reflected discussions at the Coventry workshop (June 30-July 1st 2015) resulting from the key-note entitled 'Religion, Gender Equality and Citizenship: A Battleground without Scope for Common Ground' delivered by Dr. Line Nyhagen (Loughborough University). The statement drafting process was led by Dr. Niamh Reilly (NUI Galway) and Dr. Kristin Aune. It can be found at: https://womenreligionandsecularism.wordpress.com/2016/07/15/coventry-statement/ (accessed 30 May 2017).

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